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Our Lives, Our Thoughts and Our Allegiance: New Immigrants and American Industry in 1914

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“Our Lives, Our Thoughts and Our Allegiance:” New Immigrants and American Industry in 1914¹

The Michigan Copper Country Strike of 1913-1914 announced a period of dramatic change in American history in which immigrant workers took center stage. The decade that followed was bookended by interruptions to mass immigration, first brought on by the eruption of war in Europe, and then in 1924 by the virtual banning of mass immigration through the National Origins Act.

The years in between were punctuated by bitter labor conflicts—the Colorado miners’ strike, the Mesabi Range Strike, the Great Steel Strike of 1919 to name but a few—in which immigrants predominated. It was a decade of intense ideological conflict for the loyalty of immigrants among competing currents of working class radicalism and patriotic nationalism—conflicts exacerbated by the loyalty drive of WWI, the Russian Revolution, and revolutions and counter-revolutions in Europe. And it was a decade in which the basic tenets of American labor relations were altered, with labor turnover and employee loyalty understood as problems worthy of study and redress.

In 1924, the policy of open immigration—from the standpoint of US capitalism the policy of a superabundance of cheap labor—was abandoned once and for all. Along with the desire to create a more stable, loyal workforce, the motivation to close the Golden Door was driven by the conclusion that European immigrants were the carriers of dangerous working class radicalism. It was of course not European immigrants in general targeted for exclusion by the National Origins Act, but Eastern and Southern European immigrants in particular—the so-called “new immigrants,” a term that had come into common usage to describe a great many European peoples, among them Italians, Eastern European Jews, Poles, Lithuanians, Finns, Slovaks, Russians, Ukrainians, Slovenes, Serbs, Croatians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Romanians, and Lebanese.

Already by 1914 what might be called the national preoccupation with the new immigrants had emerged, spearheaded by Progressive reformers and experts from the newly developed field of labor relations, and tail-ended by politicians and industrialists.² The

¹ Michael G. Karni, “The Founding of the Finnish Socialist Federation and the Minnesota Strike of 1907.” 72, in *For the Common Good: Finnish Immigrants and the Radical Response to Industrial America*. Michael G. Karni and Douglas J. Ollila, Jr. (Superior, Wisconsin: Työmies Society, 1977).

² On the Progressive preoccupation with new immigrants, see for examples James R. Barrett, *Work and Community in the Jungle: Chicago's Packinghouse Workers, 1894-1922* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 64-67; Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House: With Autobiographical Notes* ed. Victoria Bissell Brown (Boston: Bedford/St. Martens, 1999); Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, ed. James R. Barrett (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1967). For organized labor's attitude toward new immigrants, see Gwendolyn Mink, *Old Labor and New Immigrants in American Political Development: Union, Party, and State, 1875-1920* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986). For the relationship between new immigrants and American radicalism, consult the Paul Buhle and Dan Georgeakas edited volume, *The Immigrant Left in the United States* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

immigrants were a mystery; a world apart. When investigator Jerome Davis said of Russian immigrants that they “are almost as completely isolated from the American people as if they would live in the heart of giant Russia,” he might have been referring to any new immigrant group.³

Part of this socio-cultural distance arose from an actual spatial distance, which could be appraised in different ways. The expanse separating places such as the overwhelmingly new immigrant Iron Range of Minnesota from what was thought of as “civilization,” was measured in the hundreds of miles and in days, rather than hours, of travel. Yet the milling neighborhoods of the Chicago area’s Calumet steel milling region might as well have been just as far from the city’s leafy middle class neighborhoods and imposing downtown. Even in downstate Illinois coal mining towns one could find this spatial separation. There the small middle classes huddled together in few largish houses set off against dozens or hundreds of miners’ shacks and crowded boarding houses.⁴

Whether mining towns or factory or mill neighborhoods, these immigrant “industrial villages,” as they have been called, were dominated by single industries. Observers commented on what seemed to be the overpowering physical presence of industry over humanity. Progressive reformer Mary Heaton Vorse captured this in her description of the Mesabi Range, written as though she had a bird’s eye view:

The Mesaba range is a crescent of towns and mines flung over sixty miles of pit-scarred country, open pits yawning, open pits half a mile across, red as dried blood, pits so deep that the engineers crawling up their flanks look like beetles. Pits the color of burnt lumber, streaked with rust, streaked with yellow. Around the pits forest fires have left the charred stubs of great trees. Among the burnt stumps are boulders strewn there by glaciers. There are nine beautiful towns and fifty bleak ‘locations’ squatting about the flanks of the mines.⁵

Edith Abbott and Sophonisba Breckinridge offered a description similar in tone of South Chicago’s steel mill neighborhood:

On the one side, shutting out the lake, are the huge mills behind high paling fence, the great chimneys belching forth dense masses of smoke which hangs over the neighborhood like clouds

³ See for example, E. A. Ross, *The Old World in the New; the Significance of Past and Present Immigration to the American People*. (New York: The Century Company, 1914); Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race: Or, the Racial Basis of European History*. (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1916); Jerome Davis, *The Russians and Ruthenians in America*: 104.

⁴ For a contemporary description of the segregation of mill towns and mill neighborhoods, see, Byington, Margaret F. Byington “Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town,” in *The Pittsburgh Survey: Findings in Six Volumes*, ed. Paul Underwood Kellogg (New York: Charities Publication, 1910) and Breckinridge and Abbott, “Chicago Housing Conditions.” The best work on space and social relations in coal mining towns is the PhD dissertation by Caroline Merithew (née Waldron) “The Great Spirit of Solidarity: The Illinois Valley Mining Communities and the Formation of Interethnic Consciousness, 1889-1917” (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2000.)

⁵ Vorse, Mary Heaton, *Men and Steel*. (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1920): 14.

of darkness and pollute the atmosphere so that no whiff of the air comes untainted from the great lake... Within these barriers and under this pall stretch out the wide streets, unpaved and unkempt. On either side of these are the dreary succession of small frame dwellings [sic]... The stranger within the gates of South Chicago is overwhelmed with the fact that the world is made for industry, not for men and women and little children; that with magnificent enterprise on the one hand there is a hideous waste of human life on the other.⁶



Figure 1. "Looking north on Green Bay Street." South Chicago, ca. 1911.⁷

⁶ Breckinridge and Abbott. "Chicago Housing Conditions": 145-176.



Figure 2. South Chicago near the mills, smokestacks looming in the horizon.⁸

⁸ Ibid.



Figure 3. "Pioneer Mine pit and 'A' Shaft. In the distance, Ely." Ely, Minnesota, 1913.⁹

⁹ Minnesota State Historical Society photographic archives.



Figure 4. "Keys Station, a typical Sangamon county mining settlement, as it appeared in 1918... two miles east of Springfield."¹⁰

Conditions were typically bleak. The U.S. Coal Commission studied immigrant mining towns in Illinois, among them Divernon and Thayer near Springfield, and Benld and Livingston in southern Illinois. The towns had no electricity, plumbing or running water, no garbage removal. Outhouses were located too close to water sources, and thus drinking water was frequently contaminated. Immigrants—Italians, Lithuanians, and Poles—all kept livestock, and stored manure in their yards to fertilize gardens. This caused severe problems with black flies. The Coal Commission concluded the situation was hopeless, making a series pessimistic "recommendations" based on its survey. For "environment and habits of the population," it concluded little "improvement can be made... until the foreign stock become more assimilated." For "water supply," it argued that it would not be "economically feasible to secure satisfactory public supply." For "disposal of human excrement," "it [was] not believed that any material improvement can be hoped for along this line. For "general sanitary control and disease prevention activities," the Commission concluded that the villages were "too small to... undertake any efficient program along these lines."¹¹

¹⁰ Illustration from James Krohe. *Midnight at Noon: A History of Coal Mining in Sangamon County*. (Springfield, Ill: Sangamon County Historical Society, 1975): 9.

¹¹ U.S Public Health Service Sanitary Survey of Coal Commission, April-June 1923, "Summarized Report on the Sanitation of 123 Communities in the Bituminous Coal Districts of 9 States," Records of the U.S. Coal Commission, Record Group 68, Entry 13, National Archives and Records Administration. On the characteristics of new immigrant communities see as examples: David Brody's chapter on mill towns in *Steelworkers in America*; John E.

In the mills, factories, and mines themselves, changes to the division of labor related to skill, mechanization, managerial practice, and capitalization, interacted with the "racial" (we would today use the terms "national" or "ethnic")¹² composition of the workforce. In this way certain jobs became labeled, in the parlance of the time, "hunky work," while labor associated with skill and the operation of expensive machinery, became "American" jobs, often the preserve of old immigrant groups from northern and western Europe.

The European origin of the Iron Range miners was so overwhelming that the so-called "American element" included both the native born of fathers from "old" immigrant groups and even the foreign-born of the old immigrant groups, among whom Cornish, Scandinavian, and German workers predominated. Even so, only 18 percent of the mine workforce on the Iron Range would have been called "American." Only in the skilled jobs—steam shovel operators, railway employees, engineers and mine management—did the native born outnumber the new immigrants. The Immigration Commission described the occupational structure:

"On the Mesabi Range [...] the Finns, Italians and Austro-Hungarian races were first in the lower occupations where they are still found. The Montenegrins and Servians are doing the most common or unskilled labor such as track laying and tram work. The Scandinavians, Irish, English, and Americans are in the skilled occupations in all mines on the range. Slovenians and Finns are found in the unskilled occupations, chiefly in the underground mines, where great physical strength is required. The reason for this lies in the fact that none of the other races in the unskilled class can stand the work."

One superintendent who oversaw numerous mines was categorical in his description of the division of labor: "Slovenians and Finns do the common heavy work, while the English, Irish, and Scandinavians carry on the skilled work. Another told a journalist that while Oliver promoted men faster than in other industries, "we don't move any but the American born on to the [steam] shovels or other machines."¹³

Bodnar, *Steelton: Immigration and Industrialization, 1870-1940* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990); Byington, "Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town"; Harris, R. "Chicago's Other Suburbs." *The Geographical Review* 84, no. 4 (1994).

¹² All three terms are problematic. As applied to European nationalities, "ethnic"—today's preferred term—did not exist at the time. "National" was also infrequently used, and is doubly problematic in since that which constituted a "nation" or "national group" in Eastern Europe at the time was quite fluid and in many cases was at an incipient state. Both terms, furthermore, are pregnant with present-ist political and racial assumptions. Though it is itself impossible to define in any meaningful way, I will use the term "race" in since that was the most frequently used term of the period, and it reflects, moreover, a closer connotation for today's readers' eyes to the marginalized position that new immigrants actually confronted, as opposed to the more neutral or positive "ethnic" and "national".

¹³ Betten, "The Origins of Ethnic Radicalism in Northern Minnesota, 1900-1920." *International Migration Review* 4, no. 2 (1970): 51; Immigration Commission Reports, Volume 16, Part 18, "Iron Ore Mining": 339-341; Ross, *Finn Factor*, 108; Immigration Commission, Reports, Volume 16, Part 18, "Iron Ore Mining" 314, 340; John Fitch, "The Steel Workers," *Pittsburgh Survey*. Ed. Paul Kellogg, (Russell Sage Foundation: Pittsburgh, 1910.): 142-149; On the relationship between skill and nationality or "race", see for example Barrett and Roediger, "Inbetween Peoples": 3-44; Brody, *Steelworkers in America; the Nonunion Era* (New York: Russell, 1970); Isaac Hourwich, *Immigration and Labor*, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1912); Barrett, *Work and Community in the Jungle*, 54-58; Cliff Brown, "Racial Conflict and Split Labor Markets: The A.F.L. Campaign to Organize Steel Workers, 1918-1919." *Social Science History* 22, no. 3, Special Issue: Migration and the Labor Markets (Autumn 1998): 319-347;

The description of Finns as "radicals" and troublemakers appears time and again. Dillingham Commission concluded that Finns were "retarded" "by their surliness and radical tendencies." One mining superintendent called the Finns "good laborers but trouble breeders" inclined to socialism. Another noted that "for hard physical work the Finns are preferred, but they are a surly, troublesome lot, and among the younger men are many who are anarchists."¹⁴

Southern Europeans, often juxtaposed against "white men," fared no better: "The Montenegrins and Italians are shiftless and fit only for the most menial work... The 'black races' (meaning the Montenegrins, Servians [sic], South Italians, Greeks, and Croatians) can not do the work in three days that a white man can do in one, when working man to man. One trouble with the 'black' fellows is that they do not eat enough." The superintendent of another mine held that "all of the races are good workmen" except for "the Montenegrin and 'black Italians' (meaning South Italians)."¹⁵

The second generation did not escape, so that one observer could conclude that by the word "foreigners" "the steel industry means not all immigrants or sons of immigrants, but only the 'new immigration; consisting of the scores of races from eastern and southeastern Europe." In an interview conducted in the 1980s, retired coalminer Valentino Lazaretti still remembered the strange formulation of "American": "we had Americans [mineworkers], too... They could have been Scotch. They could have been many nationalities... Swedish or anything." In an interview taken in 1967, David Saposs, who studied the steel industry in the wake of the Great Steel Strike of 1919, recalled the pervasiveness of this division. He recalled talking to children playing in a steel mill town, who responded to the question "what are you?" with "we're foreigners." "I said, 'where were you born?' They said 'Right here in Apollo'... If you were east European you were foreigners. If you were German, you were American, because you were north European." At the steel mill in New Kensington, Pennsylvania, as of 1919, no "foreigner" had ever held the position of roller, a fact true also of American-born workers of foreign parentage.¹⁶

The metaphysics of American race-thinking in 1914 grew out of the fact that vast majority of new immigrant workers were industrial workers. This gave rise to shared experiences: the prejudice, the poor living conditions, the dangerous, and dirty work, and a perception that advancement out of these positions was virtually blocked in both the first and second generation. Indeed, only a narrow section among new immigrant communities could aspire to make their living as clergy, professionals and small businessmen—*i prominenti* the Italians called them. One scholar has found that among Yugoslav immigrants "up to the First

Barrett and Roediger, "Inbetween Peoples;" Brody, *Steelworkers in America*; William Z. Foster, *The Great Steel Strike and Its Lessons* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, inc, 1920.); Charles Adams Gulick, *Labor Policy of the United States Steel Corporation* (New York: Columbia University, 1924) 107-133; Interchurch World Movement of North America, and Bureau of Industrial Research. *Report on the Steel Strike of 1919* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920.); Hourwich, *Immigration and Labor*. 148-176; 394-413.

¹⁴Immigration Commission Reports, Volume 16, Part 18, "Iron Ore Mining": 339-341.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Saposs, "Interview with Five Lithuanians and One Italian Young Fellows, All Born in E. Vandergrift and Educated through Grade School. 10/30/19," in *Saposs Papers* (1919).

World War it was not possible at all to talk about a ... middle class" —only some "who attempted to attain a better material position" such as "merchants, innkeepers, saloon owners, bankers, *sifkartasi* (ticket agents for shipping companies), and later translators, writers, priests, and an occasional doctor or lawyer."¹⁷

The immigrants were industrial workers, part of a massive global labor migration. La Sorte has estimated that 80 percent of Italian migrants from 1871 to 1910 wound up in positions of common or agricultural labor. A separate study found that the same percentage of Polish immigrants lived in industrial cities and worked as laborers prior to W.W.I. The same among Hungarians: in 1910 40 percent labored in steel mills and another 40 percent worked in coal mines. A major 1910 survey of immigrants in industry found that two thirds of all miners in both the iron and copper industry were foreign born; in coal mining the figure was one half.¹⁸

The world of the new immigrant in 1914 had been created by powerful historical forces, above all else the dramatic growth of American industry. Until then, as Bruno Ramirez has put it, U.S. immigration policy amounted, if not in so many words, to a "labor-market policy." The characteristic of the immigrant communities that caused more suspicion among contemporaries than any other—mobility—was in fact the characteristic U.S. industry found most attractive.¹⁹

Over the next decade that would change, due to a combination of factors that I develop more fully in my dissertation. Chief among these, however, was the growing labor militancy rooted in the industrial working class. the largest strike wave in US history raged between 1916-1922, and peaked in 1919, when 4.5 million workers walked off their jobs. At the same time, radicalism—whether that espoused by the Industrial Workers of the World, the Socialist Party,

¹⁷ Ivan Cizmici, "The Involvement of Yugoslav Socialists in the Socialist Party of America and the Socialist Labor Party of America, 1903-1924," *Labor Newspaper Preservation Project*, Christine Harzig and Dirk Hoerder, eds. (Universitat Bremen: 1985): 463; Frances Krljic, "Round Trip Croatia," in Dirk Hoerder, ed., *Labor Migration in the Atlantic Economies: The European and North American Working Classes During the Period of Industrialization*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1985.: 407.

¹⁸ Michael La Sorte, *La Merica: Images of the Italian Greenhorn Experience* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1985); Walaszek, "Polish Worker:" 47-49; Mark Wyman, *Round-Trip to America: The Immigrants Return to Europe, 1880-1930* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1993); Jerome Davis, *The Russian Immigrant* (New York: Macmillan, 1922): 16-17; Carl Ross, *The Finn Factor in American Labor, Culture, and Society*. (New York Mills, Minnesota: Parta Printers, 1977): 100-101; Jett Lauck, and Edgar Sydenstricker, *Conditions of Labor in American Industries: A Summarization of the Results of Recent Investigations* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1917.) ; Barrett, *Work and Community in the Jungle*: 36-47; Puskas, *From Hungary to the United States: 127-148*; Timothy L. Smith, "Religious Denominations as Ethnic Communities: A Regional Case Study." *Church History* 35, no. 2 (1966): 207-226.

¹⁹ Bruno Ramirez, *When Workers Fight: The Politics of Industrial Relations in the Progressive Era, 1898-1916*, p. 133 (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1978); David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Adam Walaszek, "Was the Polish Worker Asleep? Immigrants, Unions, and Workers' Control in America, 1900-1922," *Polish American Studies* 78, (Spring: 1989); David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Martha Ellen Shiells, "Collective Choice of Working Conditions: Hours in British and U.S. Iron and sTeel, 1890-1923." *Journal of Economic History* 50, no. 2 (1990): 379-392; McCalhoun, 242-245; Graziosi, "Common Laborers, Unskilled Workers, 1880-1915:" 512-544; Fitch, "The Steel Workers" *Pittsburgh Survey*: 166-191.

or the nascent communist movement, found its most fertile soil in the new immigrant communities. In the dreams of the radicals and the nightmares of corporate and state authority, the two tendencies—labor militancy and working class radicalism—seemed bound for convergence.

Finally, American big business had, in those years, “discovered” for the first time the problems of labor turnover, a discovery that should perhaps be dated to implementation of the \$5 day by Henry Ford early in 1914 in order to ensure continuous production on his new assembly lines. The idea of continuous employment was conjoined to a new emphasis on employee loyalty—a set-up in which ideas of industrial democracy and workers' control were impermissible.²⁰

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